

20 The training of imams in Italy

The case of CO.RE.IS

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Abstract

There are over one and a half million Muslims residing in Italy. This diverse Muslim community faces many challenges, including a lack of official recognition by the Italian government. The Islamic association *Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana* (Italian Islamic Religious Community, CO.RE.IS) has undertaken the task of establishing institutions addressing the importance of religious tolerance. Through building mosques, developing curricula, and providing training for imams in Italy, CO.RE.IS seeks to promote a united and moderate representation of Italian Islam. This chapter centres on the role of the CO.RE.IS in offering both imam-training courses and general courses on Islam since 1995.

Keywords: Italian Islam, institution-building, Islam and democracy, mosques building

1 Islam and the State in Italy

Muslims in Italy are still waiting to receive the official government recognition that would give them the same status as the numerous other religions that have already signed agreements with the state. In the absence of an official body dedicated to these matters, the places of worship and ministers of the Islamic faith depend on initiatives undertaken by individuals or associations seeking to meet the religious needs of the about one and a half million Muslims in Italy. Flats, offices, cellars, and garages are often used as locations for the Friday prayers of Muslim communities, while volunteers – mainly immigrants from non-EU countries – and foreign imams sent by international Islamic organizations or the embassies of Muslim countries

try to carry out the function of preacher and provide moral support to the community. The majority of Muslims in Italy are first-generation immigrants, mainly from Turkey, Albania, Morocco, and other parts of North Africa, but there are also growing numbers of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Senegalese Muslims who have had limited education or professional training, and who are often unfamiliar with the Italian legal system, culture, or language. For most of these immigrants, Islam is an expression of a natural sensibility and cultural heritage intertwined with memories of their youth in their home countries.

Given the growing presence of Muslims in the country, Italian state institutions have promoted some important initiatives in pursuit of a united and moderate representation of Italian Islam. In September 2004, for the first time in Italian history, the Italian President received a delegation of Italian Muslims at the *Quirinale*, his official residence in Rome. A year later, the then-Minister of Internal Affairs Giuseppe Pisanu, formed a group of sixteen Muslims to act as advisors for understanding Italian Islam. The President welcomed this delegation and permanently appointed them as the Advisory Board for Italian Islam (*Consulta per l'Islam Italiano*). Headed by the Minister of Internal Affairs and further empowered by Pisanu's successor Giuliano Amato, the *Consulta* is composed of the signatories of the 'Manifesto against terrorism and for life' (*Manifesto contro il terrorismo e per la vita*), which was published on 2 September 2004 in the newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*. Representatives of Italian Islamic civil society and those responsible for the Muslim community used this manifesto to condemn the manipulation of religious identity and to express their full adherence to the principles of the Constitution and the values of Italian culture.

The *Consulta per l'Islam Italiano* unites Muslims who are Italian by birth with those who come from Albania, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Senegal, Somalia, and Tunisia and who have either already obtained Italian nationality or are, to a large extent, integrated into the Italian society while still maintaining their original citizenship. These Muslim advisors connected to the Minister of Internal Affairs have successfully highlighted the differing perspectives on and interpretations of Islam within the context of the Italian public and political debate. However, this would not have been the case without the recent involvement of the members of the *Consulta per l'Islam Italiano* in various parliamentary commissions, for instance on the Constitutional Affairs Law on Religious Freedom and on Social Affairs and Family Conditions, and in the anticipatory discussions for the presentation of certain proposed laws concerning immigration,

integration, citizenship, and equal opportunities. The importance and the social implications of religious pluralism and cultural diversity in Italy led Minister of Internal Affairs Giuliano Amato to establish *La Carta dei valori della cittadinanza e dell'integrazione* (The Charter of the Values of Citizenship and Integration)¹ with the active involvement of both the *Consulta per l'Islam Italiano* and stakeholders from other religious denominations and major ethnic associations present in Italy.

2 CO.RE.IS

Since 1995, CO.RE.IS² has been promoting and organizing a programme of Islamic theological training for religious leaders, both men and women, and ministers of faith or imams. This programme is meant to enable these individuals to deepen their knowledge of traditional Quranic doctrines. Comparisons with the sacred scriptures of other traditions and study of the Italian legal system and the history of western thought are also regarded as essential elements for the training of Muslim religious leaders in contemporary civil society, and as a way to eliminate segregation and extremism.

In 1995, CO.RE.IS felt that the time had come to stop attending congregational prayers organized by the Islamic centres in a number of Italian cities. This dissociation had nothing to do with the Italian citizenship of the members of CO.RE.IS, for most are converts to Islam; this differs from other communities, which primarily consist of immigrants. It also did not concern a distinction between Westerners and those originating from outside Europe, between natives and immigrants, or between converts and those born into the religion. Rather, it was the distinction between everyday believers and political militants, between those sensitive to the nature of how they conceived the spirit of Islam and those who, in their sermons and conversations, used proselytising language and ideological propaganda. All too often, the sermons in the Islamic centres promoted Islamic extremism, theorized about alleged Christian imperialist plots, and emphasized the struggle against Zionism. Many Muslims, both those born into the religion and converts, felt very uncomfortable in these settings

¹ *Carta dei valori della cittadinanza e dell'integrazione*, http://www1.interno.gov.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/sezioni/sala_stampa/speciali/altri_speciali/carta_dei_valori; for the full text see: http://www.milano.istruzione.lombardia.it/edsalute/normativa/files/carta_valori_cittadinanza_integrazione.pdf.

² <http://www.coreis.it/13/>.

– places that were supposed to be prayer halls for the Friday community assembly, but that, in fact, had evidently been taken over by a number of extremists who were intending to build an international network. A number of Muslim immigrants were expelled from these Islamic social centres and, consequently, forced to restrict their religious practices to the private sphere to avoid being associated with the undesirable formation of a parallel society that they considered neither Islamic nor Arab, but simply set up as an alternative to the established democratic cultural and political system. This also resulted in Italian Muslims taking on the responsibility of training others, as they could not tolerate the unjustifiable exploitation of Islam and its values by extremist groups.

3 CO.RE.IS's activities

This section describes the activities that CO.RE.IS has developed.

3.1 Building mosques

When CO.RE.IS presented the details of the project for the Al-Wahid mosque in Milan to the municipal officials and politicians and those from the Lombardy region, it decided to concentrate on the essentials, avoiding issues such as minarets and simply requesting a place of worship in a building that CO.RE.IS already owned and that was in need of renovation. The aim was to promote urban, technical, judicial, cultural, and architectural coherence through a transparent agreement between the public administration and an accredited and trustworthy organization of Islam in Italy. The debate with some local officials and politicians led CO.RE.IS to look at the details in depth and to accept certain conditions that would have gone against this laudable collaboration, had both sides applied them in a bureaucratic or a close-minded manner. The Board for the Integration of the Municipality of Milan (*Commissione per l'Integrazione del Comune di Milano*) approved the project in December 2000, allowing CO.RE.IS to convert an industrial warehouse into a place of worship. Since then CO.RE.IS has undertaken similar efforts to raise the necessary funds to pursue new buildings and to start constructing the Al-Wahid and other mosques. The construction of a mosque in the heart of Milan as part of the urban environment and in full contact with the life of the city is of fundamental importance, not only as a confirmation of the call to a divine reality, but also as a symbol of Islam's interaction with the contemporary world.

3.2 Development of courses

CO.RE.IS originally started to develop training courses with the intention of meeting the needs of Italian Muslims who wished to learn more about the doctrine and the practice of their faith. It was only later that these courses developed into their present forms – a course for imams, and a series of lessons for the training of Muslim religious experts and theologians. These two courses are different in character: while the training of imams focuses on basic knowledge of the Islamic religious sciences and the Italian legal system, the course for theologians combines programmes of comparative religious studies, the history of Islamic civilization, the history of Western philosophical thought, and intercultural education. There are also optional courses in Classical Arabic and Italian for foreigners.

The imam-training course provides the students with an expanded knowledge of the Quran, Classical Arabic, Italian, and the contemporary social context, to improve their ability to lead the prayers and prepare sermons. CO.RE.IS believes that imams who have successfully completed its courses will be recognized by Muslims in Italy as reliable and insightful, combining the wealth and depth of the Islamic doctrine with the harmonious testimony of the religion while seeking to respect Italian society in every way. The imams are taught to deliver sermons in Italian, in addition to the Arabic-language ritual prayers and Quranic and traditional formulae prescribed for the Friday prayers. The duties of an imam revolve in particular around the pillars of religion and the juridical rules that allow it to be practiced – in this case – in the contemporary Western world. This is a world where Muslim communities live as religious minorities in secularized societies. As religious minorities, Italian Muslims have particular identity heritages that they seek to protect from widespread prejudices and stereotypes. The imam must be able to guide the faithful to both spiritual devotion and a sense of responsibility towards the society in which they live, protect the community from the interference of foreign political forces and extremist influences, and ensure that the place of worship has the greatest possible transparency, reflecting the dignity that should characterize an Islamic religious space.

3.3 The role of imams

CO.RE.IS often advises imams to avoid connections with centres that have an ideological, extremist, or sectarian background in order to preserve what it considers the true and authentic character of the Italian mosques where

Muslim worshippers wish to meet. It is the intention of CO.RE.IS to present these places as models of widespread integration in the urban areas and as meeting places for Muslims that are free from internal political exploitation or the logic of marginalization. For this reason, imams must also be able to function as linguistic mediators – translating the tenets of the Islamic religion for the first generation of Muslim immigrants from various non-EU countries, while also being able to address these future European citizens in the language of the nation in which they live. It is important for young people to look up to the imam as not only a religious leader, but also a precious guide who can help them live their faith in a worthy and natural manner amidst fellow students or workers, and to learn to express this dignity in the context of their families.

While this does not necessarily mean that the imam must act as a social mediator, his spiritual and moral assistance can be decisive in bringing harmony to the relationship between faith, reason, culture, and human rights. The courses offered by CO.RE.IS are intended to eliminate the risk that the religion would be seen as incongruent with the contemporary Italian context. The imam cannot, by nature, represent a language, a culture, or a foreign nation, but he can be particularly effective as a faithful interpreter of not only the religious doctrine but also the way the doctrine is experienced by the believers he addresses in his religious role in the context of the language and culture of the country in which he lives.

In the eyes of CO.RE.IS, imported imams, or those appointed by international Islamic organizations from abroad or religious institutions of foreign governments, represent an obstacle to the active participation of the faithful and ministers in the country's activities. They are, in CO.RE.IS's view, conditioned by a vision that is not fully compatible with how Italian Islam should look. Therefore, it is CO.RE.IS's expectation that the new generation of Muslims born in Italy will not recognize these foreign imams as credible or useful guides for their lives in this country. To guarantee the effectiveness of this relationship, the CO.RE.IS courses do not follow a classic programme of study for either the language or doctrine as offered in many Muslim countries. Instead, the programmes start from the knowledge and experiences of each individual imam to allow him to expand his knowledge and assist the faithful in their spiritual orientation in their youth.

Themes such as life and death, study, work, love, and the family are particularly significant because they allow the imam to contextualize his doctrinal competence in a practical application. The CO.RE.IS courses for imams therefore focus on the following aspects: birth; the sacred value of human existence; the creation of the world and the responsibility of the

representatives of God in this world; the equal dignity of men and women; the pillars of the religion; education and the search for knowledge; the transmission of knowledge; the principles of the Islamic faith; the stories of the prophet in the Quran; inter-religious dialogue; earning one's livelihood; family unity; civil and religious marriage; parents' duties towards their children; Islamic identity and active participation in the prosperity of society; political responsibility; and universal ethical values.

Additionally, the imam attends courses on health regulations in hospitals regarding childbirth, and the treatment of patients and the deceased, gains basic knowledge on the procedures for the registration of births, marriages, divorces, and deaths, and learns about the current legislation regarding training or work contracts in Italy. He is also trained in matters related to education in both state and private schools, and the rules concerning the specific needs of Muslim children regarding both teaching and the preparation of food.

When answering questions of the faithful, imams must not only aim to keep in line with the principles of the religion, but also think of a way to avoid conflict between the religious needs of the believers and full respect of the Italian legal system and cultural heritage. This is the only possible way for ministers of the Muslim faith to contribute in a significant manner to the constructive and active participation of Muslims in society: through facilitating their civil, intercultural, and professional roles and by maintaining and reviving the spiritual heritage of their religious identity. The imams are expected to be able to cooperate with state institutions of all levels and with Muslims in the process of integrating the Muslim community into the contemporary, religiously plural and culturally diverse Italian society. Thanks to the work of these imams, CO.RE.IS is confident that the new generations of Muslims in Italy will be able to both experience their religion in a serene manner and discover the meaning of citizenship in a democratic country.

The two-year course requires students to attend lessons for at least twenty hours a month, mainly on Fridays, to allow the future imams to continue other studies or work activities. There is also an additional pedagogical benefit to this way of working: the students can practice what they learn in the course while performing their everyday commitments. Another issue is the imam's uncertainty after completing the training course. The lack of an official organization with the task of managing or coordinating the Islamic places of worship in Italy means that there is no guarantee that the graduates will be appointed as an imam by any of the local Muslim communities. More importantly, very few communities are in a position to employ a full-time imam to provide for the needs of the faithful.

In the past few years, the first group of Italian Muslims have successfully completed the imam-training course. They have since made themselves available to carry out their functions on a voluntary basis on various occasions in different parts of the country.

3.4 Further initiatives

The main obstacles to the continuity of the courses are a lack of financial and institutional support. CO.RE.IS is fully aware of this situation, and since 2005 has started collaborating with national universities and a network of national and international partners to empower these specialization courses. CO.RE.IS is not limiting itself to Muslims who wish to deepen their knowledge of the doctrine so as to carry out their functions of religious leadership in a capable and dignified manner; instead, the courses are available for every man or woman who is interested, for whatever reason, in a theological grounding and questions of social responsibility regarding the diverse aspects of contemporary Italian Islam. In addition to imams, there is a need for people with Islamic training inside the community, and who are also able to use their expertise outside the community to deal with governmental institutions, professional associations, social solidarity organizations, school administrations, cultural mediation, hospitals, social work, ethnic communities, and other religions.

The outcome of the first two-year training course held at the Al-Wahid Mosque in Milan has been gathered in the book *Inside the Mosque* (Pallavicini, 2007). Besides continuing the course at the Al-Wahid Mosque – which was later developed as the Mizan center project –, in the following years a Master's programme in Islamic and interreligious training was jointly proposed by CO.RE.IS, the Philosophy Department of the University of Genoa, and the Interreligious Studies Academy (ISA) in Milan. This programme requested financial support from the National Funds for the Integration of Immigrants. Later, the Institut des Hautes Etudes Islamiques (IHEI) based in Lyon successfully adopted the same training course in France.

To stimulate the further integration of Muslims in Italy, CO.RE.IS has introduced another two-year programme on interreligious theology and intercultural education. Besides maintaining the programme reserved for imams, lessons and seminars focusing on social sciences, politics, teaching methods, and liberal arts studies have been added. The following themes are dealt with in this programme:

- The history of Islamic civilization; East and West; tradition and modernity; orthodoxy and extremism.
- The Quran and the prophetic traditions: the sources of Islamic doctrine and the interpretations of the law schools.
- North-South exchanges and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation; conflict prevention and the peace process in the Middle East; Islam and jihad, the Islamic caliphate and Arab nationalism.
- Sacred science and Western culture; state and private schools in Italy; religious education and the history of religions; globalization and ghettoization.
- Avicenna and Averroes, Al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi: metaphysics, theology, intellectuality, philosophy, and reason; comparisons with the philosophy of Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche; comparison with the Christian thought of Saints Bernard, Thomas Aquinas, and Augustine; comparison with the works of Plato, Meister Eckhart, and Dante Alighieri.
- Dialogue between believers and non-believers; the oneness of God and the Abrahamic brotherhood; the encounter with Judaism and Christianity.
- Freedom of expression and the language of religious symbols; ostentation and religious freedom in European societies; human rights and islamophobia.
- The Italian constitution; immigration law and the European Union's policy on integration; democracy, secularism, and pluralism; the Italian state and religious pluralism; the Concordat with the Catholic Church and the system of agreements; the Council for Italian Islam.

The aim of this programme, which is not restricted to Muslims, is to present a balanced synthesis between the Western cultural perspective and the Islamic one. The programme culminates in a master's degree and is aimed at future managers of Islamic cultural centres in Europe, social workers and intercultural mediators, headmasters/-mistresses and school teachers at all levels, religious teachers, those involved in interreligious dialogue, trade union groups and representatives of the private sector, professionals and entrepreneurs working abroad, employees of the public administration engaged in international missions, journalists, and people interested in learning more about Italian Islam and its development as interpreted by European Muslim intellectuals.

4 Conclusion

A series of agreements for cooperation with state universities and Christian theological institutes are currently being examined with the aim of developing academic synergies. It is hoped that this will produce research projects and experiences of interest from scientific, intercultural, interreligious, and international points of view. The new European citizenship cannot disregard the contribution of the sacred dimension and, in particular, that of the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A thorough knowledge of religious values and the composition of the various revelations can enrich the common cultural heritage, become a vital element for fighting phenomena such as antisemitism and islamophobia, and help in conflict prevention and resolution.³ Because Muslims are a religious minority in Italy, CO.RE.IS finds it important to react, in a constructive manner, to the tendency towards adopting a sense of victimization, vindication, or provocation that characterizes some Muslims. CO.RE.IS believes that every spiritual, intellectual, and social form of expression of all qualified believers and honest citizens is an added value and a specific responsibility, and that it is not dependent on the number of representatives or on the number of days one has actually lived in Europe.⁴

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3 For interreligious dialogue in Islam, see Demiri, 2011; Ford, 2006; Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, 2011; ISESCO, 2012; Morrow, 2013; Nagl-Docekal and Kaltenbacher, 2008; Schneier and Shams, 2013; Turrini and Nicelli, 2013; Volf, 2010; and Weisse, 2009.

4 Many efforts have been made to outline the Islamic viewpoint and needs through concrete topics such as the role of women, health and welfare, or education and science (see Al-Farabi, 2008; Al-Ghazali, 2009; Al-Jawziyya, 2004; As-Suyuti, 1994; Aslan, 2009; Guiderdoni, 2013; Naseef, 1999; Pallavicini, 2010a, 2010b; Ridwan, 2006).

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